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OPERATION SHARP GUARD: LESSONS LEARNED FOR  
THE POLICYMAKER AND COMMANDER

by

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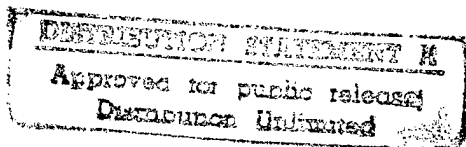
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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Historical Atlas of East Central Europe

## ABSTRACT

The Balkan states of the former Yugoslavia sit astride a fault line of competing religions and ethnicities; and when a dispute breaks out, it can widen quickly to engage other nations as well, much like World War I. The year 1991 was no exception with the outbreak of hostilities in the former Yugoslavia.

With the prospect of a swiftly escalating war, the UN faced the urgent need to defuse tensions and bring the warring factions to the peace table. Since the United States was then unwilling to commit ground troops, the UN agreed to an alternative policy of imposing an arms embargo on all warring factions, and economic sanctions, on the two republics of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), Serbia and Montenegro.

The UN and European Union (EU) tasked NATO and the Western European Union (WEU), respectively, first to monitor compliance and later to enforce it in the Adriatic Sea and Strait of Otranto. The effort became more efficient when the two separate naval operations merged into one - Operation Sharp Guard - under NATO command. From 1992-1996, NATO/WEU challenged 74,000 vessels. Only six ships were caught trying to break the embargo/sanctions, and no ship was successful.

While it is impossible to isolate the embargo/sanctions as the sole cause for the Serbs' ultimately agreeing to the Dayton Accords, FRY economic performance deteriorated significantly 1990-1995. Faced with UN threats to impose even stiffer sanctions, Serbia quickly agreed to the Dayton Accords in November 1995.

Operation Sharp Guard reveals several lessons. For the policymaker, it illustrates the importance of as many nations as possible agreeing to observe an embargo/sanctions. That is, when "sending" countries are disciplined and observe embargo/sanctions requirements, a critical mass of force can build up on the "target" country, much like Clausewitz' prescription to mass force on the enemy. However, embargos and sanctions take time and are not the appropriate policy for those desiring a quick victory. For the commander, Operation Sharp Guard proved that NATO and WEU can work well together, at least on joint naval operations and under NATO command. However, until the EU matures and can present a common front on foreign policy issues with more regularity, the United States should not expect the WEU to take on an operational task and go it alone.

"He will regret it but once, and that will be continuously."

Jeb Stuart (Confederate) of his father-in-law's decision to fight on the Union side.

## **Preface**

From June 15, 1993, to October 1, 1996, the Western European Union (WEU) and NATO mounted a joint naval embargo - Operation Sharp Guard - against Montenegro and Serbia, the two republics forming the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), to enforce the UN's arms embargo and economic sanctions. The operation took place in the Strait of Otranto and the Adriatic Sea. Nations contributing forces were Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Over 74,000 ships were challenged; 6,000, inspected at sea; and more than 1,400, directed to port for inspection. 1/

But were the embargo and sanctions effective in halting FRY (i.e., Serbian) aggression in the war in the former Yugoslavia? Are there lessons to be drawn from Operation Sharp Guard for future multilateral embargos/sanctions? This study will attempt to extract such lessons by analyzing 1) the theoretical framework for sanctions/embargos; 2) the strategic reasons for undertaking Operation Sharp Guard; 3) its operational aspects; and 5) its economic effects.

In the end, it may prove empirically impossible to isolate the embargo/sanctions as the sole cause for the FRY's agreeing to the Dayton Accords. Nonetheless, like Jeb Stuart's maligned father-in-law, the FRY may continuously regret having continued hostilities to the point of forcing the UN embargo and sanctions.

## **Background**

The United Nations' decision to impose an arms embargo on the former Yugoslavia and economic sanctions on the FRY was an attempt to stop the fighting in the former Yugoslavia. Hostilities began in June 1991 when the Yugoslav republics of

Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence. Serbia, controlling the Yugoslav army, immediately tried to reverse these decisions militarily, fighting one month with Slovenia and six months with Croatia. In December 1991, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia) followed suit and declared its independence, as well.

Bosnian territory then went up for grabs, as the Bosnian Serbs, supported by the Serbian army, sought to create a "Great Serbia" by seizing territory belonging to Bosnian Muslims. Ethnic hatred and religious animosity unleashed themselves as Serbia undertook "ethnic cleansing" of territory where Serbs would resettle. The European Community added fat to the fire by recognizing Slovenia and Croatia "before arrangements were made to protect the Serbian minority." 2/

In September 1991, in an attempt to stem the fighting, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 713 embargoing all deliveries of weapons and military equipment to the former Yugoslavia. In a more focussed attempt to halt Serbian aggression, there followed a series of Resolutions imposing sanctions on the FRY, which steadily tightened the grip on the FRY by moving from "monitoring" to "enforcing" the sanctions. The stranglehold tightened again when NATO, acting on behalf of the UN, and WEU, acting on behalf of the European Community, combined their previously separate naval operations monitoring the embargo/sanctions into a joint command under NATO control, Operation Sharp Guard.

### **Theoretical Framework**

An embargo may be defined as the denial, backed up by force, of a strategic commodity to a belligerent, or potential, belligerent. Economic sanctions, in turn, are "the deliberate, government-inspired withdrawal...of customary trade or financial relations." 3/ Elliot and Hufbauer contend that while sanctions are not "costless, ...they are less...costly than the alternatives", military action which may be unacceptable and diplomatic protest, which can be too weak-kneed under the circumstances. 4/ The analysts propose five standards by which policymakers, in

making a decision to embargo or sanction, can gauge the potential effectiveness of their proposed policy: significant trade between the "sender " and "target" , a target country smaller than the sender, avoiding high cost to the sender, limited goals, and quick imposition of the embargo/sanctions. 5/

The FRY embargo/sanctions met three of the five conditions. First, there was substantial existing trade between UN members and the FRY. In fact, though recent FRY trade data is not available, we know that in 1992 (the year before Operation Sharp Guard commenced), Germany, the former USSR, Italy, and the U.S. accounted for 47.5 percent of Serbia's imports, and 59.3 percent of its exports. 6/ Secondly, FRY ( the "target") was decidedly smaller than all UN members (the "sender"). Thirdly, there was little cost to the "sender". While individual UN member countries may have been affected (e.g., Romania's loss of the FRY market was a hardship), for all UN member countries there would have been markets and suppliers alternative to the FRY.

However, the FRY sanctions "failed" against two of Elliot and Hufbauer's measures. First, the goal - cessation of Serbian aggression against the Bosnian Muslims - was not "limited", or modest. However, UN members seized on an embargo/sanctions as acceptable, since its lead member, the U.S., viewed deployment of ground troops to the former Yugoslavia so politically unpalatable.

As for "quick imposition" of the sanctions/embargo, UN members acted with characteristic slowness. From July to November 1992 (prior to the July 1993 launching of Operation Sharp Guard), the UN (through NATO) and the European Community (through WEU) monitored, but did not enforce, compliance. Common sense (there is understandably no empirical evidence on the micro, or business firm, level) suggests that while UN member governments were willing to support the sanctions/embargo, individual firms in member countries may have tried to circumvent the controls during the period sanctions were simply being monitored. Common

sense, again, would also suggest that the monitoring period gave FRY suppliers time to find alternative markets; and FRY importers, alternative sources for their raw materials or component parts. These alternative markets/sources may have been along land routes in remote areas where smuggling is easy.

### **The Strategic (Political) Setting**

#### **UN AND NATO INTERESTS AND ROLE**

Former U.S. Ambassador to Yugoslavia Warren Zimmerman sees three reasons to assure a stable former Yugoslavia. 7/

1. Geopolitical. "Bosnia lies across a traditional fault line of instability... The Catholic world of the Austrian Hapsburgs, the Muslim world of the Turks, and the Orthodox world of Serbia...all jostle each other in Bosnia. Shock waves from Bosnia have already stunned its neighbors - Catholic Italy, Croatia, and Hungary; Orthodox Greece and Macedonia; Muslim Turkey and Albania... A Bosnian war ...could destabilize these countries, all of them friends and three of them NATO allies." 8/ Furthermore, should the conflict have escalated, the three NATO allies (Italy, Greece, and Turkey) could have found themselves on different sides.

2. Global. As the sole remaining superpower, the U.S. needed to deter potential aggressors (e.g., Kim Il-Sung, Vladimir Zhirinovsky and Russia's nationalists, etc.) by acting with firmness. 9/

3. Moral. Serbia's aggression was clear-cut; and, as such, the world community was not "prepared to watch the dissection of (Bosnia), a fragile multi-ethnic civilization that want(ed) to live in harmony." 10/

To Ambassador Zimmerman's three reasons for the UN interest in a stable former Yugoslavia, one can add a fourth strategic reason for the U.S. itself - maintenance of a U.S. command structure in Europe. 11/ NATO, historically under U.S. command, had always regarded Yugoslavia as an "out-of-area" territory. However, that view changed as European Union (EU) members became increasingly



concerned in 1992 with the threat to their stability of a former Yugoslavia at war. If NATO, under U.S. command, "continued to shrug its strategic shoulders at the problem, then the case for the replacement of its command structure by a European organization (i.e., the WEU) would be greatly strengthened." 12/

Thus, NATO decided to join forces with the WEU to monitor the UN embargo in July 1992 (one year prior to Operation Sharp Guard) . This decision gave NATO the opportunity "to participate in the international effort to end the fighting...(without)...United States ground forces or air forces." 13/ This decision also resulted in two separate commands, but happily kept the United States involved (through NATO) and France (through the WEU).

#### WEU Interests and Role

As the conflict escalated in the former Yugoslavia 1991-92, the EU increasingly viewed the conflict on its borders as a threat to its stability. In addition, there was a public debate over the EU's culpability in having "prematurely" recognized Slovenia and Croatia. Thus, there was an interest in defusing the conflict.

Although WEU had existed since 1948, it only assumed the role of the defense arm of the EU in 1991 when its members signed the Maastricht Treaty. 14/ WEU then consisted of all EU-member nations (except Ireland and Denmark). Although then absent from NATO, France was a member of WEU.

Thus, the 1992 monitoring of the UN embargo/sanctions was a historic first for WEU. For the first time since its founding, WEU took on a defense role, joined forces with NATO in a Combined Task Force (CTF 440), and undertook an operation "under a UN banner". 15/

Although politically fortuitous in that it involved the United States and most EU members, CTF 440 suffered operationally from having separate command structures 16/ and then through the inevitable glitches of having its mandate changed in November, 1992 from "monitoring" to "enforcing" UN sanctions against Serbia and

Montenegro.

## **THE LEGAL BASIS FOR THE FRY SANCTIONS/EMBARGO**

### **International Law**

One can view the series of UNSC Resolutions as a progressive tightening of the vise around Serbia. Alternatively, more cynically, one can view the sequence as the UN groping for the proper level of action sufficiently punitive to stop Serb aggression. UN action against the former Yugoslavia and the FRY was based upon Chapter VII of the UN Charter which permits the UN to undertake peace-enforcement operations to require compliance with UN Resolutions on sanctions. 17/

In July 1992, prior to Operation Sharp Guard, NATO and WEU ships separately began monitoring operations in the Adriatic, further to UNSCR 713 (which imposed an arms embargo against all republics of the former Yugoslavia) and to UNSCR 757 (which levied sanctions against the FRY). The sanctions excluded goods for medical purposes and foodstuffs notified to the UN, but also included transfer of funds to the FRY. Sanctions covered transit of goods across FRY borders by air, land, or sea.

In that regard, and in view of the reports of goods illegally entering the FRY via the Danube River, UNSCR 787 (November 16, 1992) inter alia specifically directed that goods shipped on the Danube River were also subject to UNSCR 757. (Note. Operation Safe Guard did not monitor shipping on the Danube, but this Resolution is mentioned as a point of interest on the Adriatic naval operations.)

As fighting continued and "monitoring" compliance with UN resolutions seemed insufficient to deter Serb aggression, the Security Council passed UNSCR 820 (April 17, 1993) to strengthen action against the former Yugoslavia by permitting NATO and WEU to enforce the embargo and sanctions. In June 1993, both NATO and WEU agreed to joint operations to strengthen their enforcement efforts further.

UNSCR 1021 (November 21, 1995) delineated the conditions under which the embargo on weapons and military equipment would be lifted once the warring parties

of the former Yugoslavia signed a peace agreement.

UNSCR 1022 (November 22, 1995) inter alia suspended UNSCR 757, 787, and 820 indefinitely with immediate effect subject to certain provisions. Specifically, the sanctions would end ten days after the first elections required by the Dayton Peace Accords, but only if Bosnian Serbs had withdrawn their forces from the zones of separation.

On June 18, 1996, the Chairman of the Security Council Committee concerning Yugoslavia announced that UNSCR 713 (the embargo on delivery of arms and military equipment) was terminated.

### **THE NAVAL OPERATION**

In general terms, Operation Safe Guard may be classified as a peace-enforcement operations since its "...objective (was) to compel compliance with resolutions or sanctions...adopted to...restore peace...". 18/ Peace-enforcement does not require belligerent parties to agree to the operation. 19/

With respect to Operation Sharp Guard, both NATO and WEU Councils approved a concept for combined operations to implement UNSCR 820. Vessels of NATO's Standing Naval Forces (STANAVFORLANT and STANAVFORMED) and WEU naval forces were brought together as Operation Sharp Guard to form Combined Task Force (CTF) 440. Operations began June 15. 20/ Effectively, WEU subordinated itself to NATO command through agreement that the allied commander of Southern European Naval Forces (COMNAVSOUTH) would assume operational control of Sharp Guard (although WEU did provide staff). Both forces reported to a joint ad hoc headquarters, Milcon Adriatic, and ultimately to NATO's Allied Forces South. 21/

Since NATO in essence assumed the role of the UN military force, Operation Sharp Guard used the NATO command and control structure, altered to accommodate consultation with UN authorities, as necessary. 22/

CTF 440 was divided into three task groups (TG). TG 440.01 operated in the

northern Adriatic near the FRY and along the Albanian coast to stop ships from entering FRY territorial waters. 23/ TG 440.01 controlled all air support and vessels in that area. Boardings were rare, since TG 440.02 would have challenged and boarded "questionable" vessels further south in its assigned area, the Straits of Otranto. 24/

TG 440.02 was further tasked with identifying and challenging all ships entering or leaving the Adriatic. Suspected ships, after being challenged and boarded, were diverted to an Italian port.

TG 440.03, in turn, was dedicated to training, port visits, logistics, and maintenance. 25/

Initial deployment in June was about 20 ships plus surveillance aircraft. 26/

To ensure the Straits were well protected from sanctions busters, the Otranto operational area was divided into a "series of...sea boxes, each the responsibility of a single warship...carefully echeloned back from the Adriatic's entrance...". 27/ The Montenegro operating area was also divided into a set of sea boxes "...to constitute a buffer zone...and...to give time for a sanctions leaker to be intercepted...".28/ Since the Montenegro boxes were in the range of shore-based missiles, Sharp Guard vessels remained in a high state of readiness. 29/ Sharp Guard vessels also had permanent clearance to operate in Albanian territorial waters to counter any possible evasion of the sanctions through this area. 30/

### Training

Although personnel underwent rigorous training before deployment, once the Task Groups were in the Adriatic, USCG personnel in the area made themselves available to provide further training. 31/ On board Sharp Guard vessels, each "boarding team" was comprised of two teams: a "guard team" to board and take control of the target ship, and a "search team".

### Air Support

Allied forces in the area helped with defense of Sharp Guard vessels. Air

surveillance was provided by Lockheed Orion Patrol aircraft from Canada, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the United States; Nimrods, from Britain; and Dassault Atlantiques, from France and Germany, all based in Sicily. 32 / Sharp Guard logged 62,300 flight hours , or 1,100 days' coverage of the Adriatic. 33/

#### Comparison of Sharp Guard Operations with Previous UN FRY Embargo/Sanctions Operations

Subordination of WEU forces to NATO command in Operation Sharp Guard improved command and control in the Adriatic operations. 34/ Operation Sharp Guard challenged 74,000 ships, inspected 6,000 at sea, and ordered 1,400 to port for inspection. 35/ Reportedly, no ship was able to break the embargo; and six ships were caught trying to do so. 36/ There are no such statistics available for previous related operations to draw conclusions of the effectiveness of Sharp Guard compared to its predecessors.

Taken at face value, Sharp Guard data, however, may suggest a very successful naval operation. One must not conclude, however, that the embargo/sanctions in toto were effective without considering transit of goods via land (i.e., smuggling) into, and out of, the FRY. (See Conclusions below.)

#### **Economic Effects of the Embargo/Sanctions**

##### A Brief Review of the FRY Economic Performance 1990-93

There are few authoritative statistical indicators of FRY economic performance, and those available do not include the entire period (1991-1996). What available statistics do indicate is that between 1990 (the base year before UN action) and 1993, the FRY experienced hyperinflation. Wages also shot upward (doubling 1991-1993), but this was not enough to keep up with prices.

Prices and Earning Indexes (1990=100) 37/

	<u>1990</u>	<u>1991</u>	<u>1992</u>	<u>1993</u>
Consumer Price Index	100	324	29,800	NA
Monthly Earnings Index	100	195	295	412

Military Expenditure as a Percentage of Government Expenditure 1995 =76.6%. 38/

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact reason for inflation. It could have been due to 1) a decline in the supply of goods because of the embargo/sanctions; 2) a decline in the supply of goods due to decreased production of consumer goods (i.e., as a result of retooling industrial production from consumer to military production); and/or 3) an increase in demand due to higher wages.

The Grey Economy and Smuggling

“Official” figures on prices and wages (above) also do not reveal the extent of the “grey” economy (i.e., black market transactions or smuggling) and the fact that many Serbs and Montenegrins may have ameliorated the hardships of life by dealing on the black market. Anecdotal information, however, suggest its pervasiveness. For example, the business community complained of the difficulty in obtaining component parts. The Montenegrin Chamber of Commerce claimed that “...the economy of...Montenegro is continuing to decline (in 1993)...Machine-building fell by a record 58 percent; the chemical industry, 33.2 percent; production of means of transport, 24.4 percent; and...electrical machinery...22 percent compared with the same period last year...The loss of the Yugoslav market and the economic blockade of the FRY (are) main causes of the decline. Industrialists also complain about ...the ‘grey economy’.”

39/ Particularly hard hit, too, was the Montenegrin merchant  
marine. 40/

Bulgarian officials also believed 300 tons of fuel were being smuggled daily over land to Serbia (August 1992) in contravention of the sanctions. 41/ The European Union alleged ships were violating the embargo sanctions by re-routing through Romania, up the Danube, and then into Serbia. 42/ Arms also reportedly continued to enter the former Yugoslavia all throughout the embargo, assisted by "a brisk black market in bogus end-user certificates, the documents needed by arms exporters when they apply for an export license." 43/ Weapons were thought to be sold mostly by suppliers in the FSU, but also in Hungary, Switzerland, Austria, Slovakia, Egypt, Turkey, Singapore, Iran, Saudi Arabia, China, and Germany. 44/

FRY officials initially reacted to the sanctions by imposing export controls, restricting foreign currency transfers abroad, and repatriating FRY foreign currency held abroad. But even with these Draconian measures, Serbian officials must have been alarmed at the probable consequences of sanctions over the long term. Serbian Prime Minister Radoman Bozovic addressed the Serbian Assembly in June 1992. "UN sanctions are going to cause serious damage to the...economy, ...reflected in repression of economic...reforms..., as well as in a considerable drop in production, employment, and the standard of living...It is necessary to do everything...to get these sanctions lifted..." 45/ Further, "GNP continues to fall, public expenditure continues to grow, while the real (re)sources do not provide sufficient income." 46/

## **CONCLUSIONS**

It is unclear whether the FRY economic decline was due solely to the effect of sanctions over time or in conjunction with high military expenditures necessary to wage the war (76.5 percent of FRY government expenditures in 1995). It is also unclear whether FRY officials themselves believed sanctions to be a significant cause of FRY economic decline - or whether FRY officials' public complaints about sanctions were intended to divert FRY public opinion from the real danger to the FRY economy - high defense expenditures - in order to keep FRY public support for the war. Nor can

we determine with any certainty how much smuggling or black market transactions may have alleviated the deleterious effects of the sanctions.

What we can say, however, is that in July 1995 when the Bosnian Serbs rejected the peace plan, the Contact Group threatened to tighten existing economic sanctions and implement new ones against Serbia. Shortly thereafter, the Bosnian Serbs returned to the peace table. This, in and of itself, may indicate the important leverage sanctions had on Serb behavior.

On the operational level, IFOR-published results (indicating that no ship was able to break the embargo) speaks to the success of the overall naval operation. Further, Operation Sharp Guard highlighted the important role naval forces can play in peacekeeping operations. Naval forces "...offer political masters a large menu of suitable responses...They can be intrusive or out of sight; they can poise or intervene; they can be easily ...deployed...and just as easily withdrawn." 47/

Finally, some have criticized that the forces deployed in Sharp Guard were disproportionate to the number of sanctions/embargo violators caught. This criticism is unfounded. Instead, the low number of attempted violators should be interpreted as indicative of Sharp Guard's "efficiency and thoroughness." 48/

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

The UN embargo and sanctions against the FRY provide strategic and operational lessons for the policymaker and commander.

On the strategic level, policymakers should not be sanguine about the ability of an embargo or sanctions to moderate a belligerent's behavior. Factors to consider in predicting the possible outcome of an embargo/sanctions include, inter alia, the economic diversity of the target country (How dependent is the target on foreign trade? Can the target survive economically on its own?); the political will of the government and its people (Is the Clausewitzian triangle balanced? Will the external threat posed by the sanctions redouble the will of the target country population, the opposite effect



the sender country is seeking?); the extent of the black market at the moment and possible alternative routes into, and out of, the target which smugglers could use to circumvent controls; the number of countries participating in the embargo/sanctions (Are there any contiguous countries not supporting the embargo/sanctions? Will any participating countries be unduly hurt by the action and thus prone not to support the action vigorously? If so, should these countries be reimbursed for business lost in order to win their support for the action?)

The FRY sanctions/embargo also shows us that these measures take time (1991-1996), and thus are not always a good policy alternative to those seeking a quick decisive victory.

Finally, as the above analysis illustrates, it is often difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of an embargo quantitatively, since statistical offices of belligerent nations often cannot conduct their work under such conditions. Nor is it often in the interest of the belligerent to reveal its economic performance to its enemy by collecting and publishing performance indicators. Thus, it is difficult for the sender country to gauge the effects of the embargo/sanctions in order to fine tune them if necessary. This is where the sender country must actively engage its intelligence service to collect whatever raw data is available, subsidized by anecdotal information gathered from a balanced sampling of economic groupings and social strata.

Finally, one should bear in mind that whatever success the embargo/sanctions may have had in bringing the Serbs to the bargaining table, the situation was a unique one. The UN embargo/sanctions benefited extensively from the overwhelming number of nations supporting the effort. Thus, to use Clausewitz's military theory metaphorically, the UN "massed" an overwhelming force on the FRY borders.

On the operational level, WEU's collaboration with Nato suggests that both coalitions should give thought to working together once again. However, until the European Union matures and is able with more regularity to present a common front

on foreign policy issues, the United States should not expect the WEU to take on an operational task and go it alone. Combined operations - in lieu of separate operations in the same operational area - also have the benefit of clear command and control.

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